

MOB VIOLENCE IN THE OLD SOUTH

By CLEMENT EATON

Mob violence is not a sectional phenomenon; it has been widespread throughout the United States. At the end of a decade of great mob violence against abolitionists, James G. Birney jotted down on one of the pages of his notebook the following notation:

1835, July, Danville, Ky. mob
October 21, Boston mob
“ “ Utica [N.Y.] mob
1836, July 28, Cincinnati mob
1837, Nov. 7, Lovejoy murdered
1838, May 17, Pa. Hall [Philadelphia] burnt.¹

This list of mobs against abolitionists is a mere fraction of the acts of violence directed against the antislavery reformers, and it is surprising to observe that Birney included only one Southern mob. Some of the most brutal and intolerant cases occurred in the Ohio Valley states, New York, and Pennsylvania. The mobbing of zealots like Theodore Weld, Samuel J. May, and William Lloyd Garrison in the Northern states did not crush out those irrespressible individuals who were preaching the doctrine that slavery was a sin. Rather, the cause of the abolitionists in the North became allied with the more fundamental American interest of preserving civil rights, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and the right of petition. After the decade of the 1830's the mobbing of abolitionists gradually subsided at the North. But below the Mason and Dixon line mob violence reached a period of the greatest intensity in the last decade of the ante bellum period. Consequently in the land of Dixie mob violence attained a greater significance than in the other sections of the country because mobs and vigilance committees continued from 1831 to 1861 to serve as a powerful instrument in controlling public opinion.

¹ James G. Birney MSS., in *James G. Birney Papers*, Library of Congress.

These mobs of the middle period of Southern history should be clearly distinguished from the vigilantes or regulating bands of the frontier who developed lynch law because of the lack of adequate courts and jails.² Even after the frontier had passed, some of the traditions of frontier society lingered in large areas of the South, among which was the practice of violence and extra-legal action. Travellers below the Potomac River were impressed with the number of natives who carried pistols or knives with keen long blades called "Arkansas toothpicks."³ The Southern states continued to be a poorly policed section of the country up to the Civil War, with jails far apart and of flimsy construction. At intervals mobs would arise, in the frontier tradition, and obtain a catharsis of violent emotion by a swift exercise of lynch law without waiting for the slow and uncertain action of the courts. In 1835, for instance, the people of Vicksburg and Natchez formed vigilance committees and ordered the gamblers that infested the river towns to leave. When a group of insolent desperadoes defied this order, a mob of enraged citizens hanged five of them.⁴

Besides the persistence of the frontier tradition in many Southern communities, there developed another custom that engendered a disregard of legal processes — the practice of dueling. Although most Southern states passed severe laws against dueling, public opinion nullified these laws and sanctioned dueling as a proper means of a gentleman to protect his honor. Col. Alexander McClung, a Whig leader of Jackson, Mississippi, was an extreme example of the effect of the *code duello* in producing a cavalier disregard of law. McClung had a quixotic sense of honor that made him swift to detect an insult and resort to a duel. He had a reputation of never fighting a bloodless duel; a funeral frequently followed his challenge. When he was appointed marshal of the Northern district of Mississippi, his advent was awaited with considerable fear, for he was the second

² James E. Cutler, *Lynch-Law: An Investigation into the History of Lynching in the United States* (New York, 1905), 112; see also Thomas W. Page, "The Real Judge Lynch," *Atlantic Monthly*, LXXXVIII, 731-43.

³ James S. Buckingham, *The Slave States of America* (2 vols., London, 1842), I, 247; Sir Charles Lyell, *A Second Visit to the United States of North America* (New York, 1849), II, 31, 32, 60, 61.

⁴ *Southern Argus* (Columbus, Mississippi), July 25, 1835; *Niles' Weekly Register*, XLVIII, 401.

best pistol shot in Mississippi. "When he did arrive," according to the testimony of a contemporary, "the landlord whose hotel he had chosen received him with profound obeisance, mortally fearful of receiving at every glance of his fierce eye a ball or a bowie knife. The boarders stared rather than ate, and when he rose to return to the sitting room, he always had a full passage and a wide berth. His first appearance on the streets called every dealer and shopkeeper to his window or door, and as they viewed his game figure and proud gait, his bold features, and nonchalant manner, their expression told that they were reading a confirmation of all that they had heard."⁵ Yet this violent figure, the murderer of half a dozen men, was a hero in Mississippi, a great favorite with the ladies, who would invite him to ride in their carriages in the cool of the evening. When he returned from the Mexican War to Natchez, the citizens prepared a great celebration, at which he delivered a flowery address in which he spoke of the laurel wreath of glory his regiment had won. Shortly after the death of Henry Clay in 1852, the legislature of Mississippi invited this blood-stained duelist to deliver a eulogy on the career of the great Whig statesman.⁶

Certain other aspects of Southern society prior to the Civil War were conducive to the emergence of mobs. The Southern states in 1850 had an illiteracy ratio among the native adult white population of 20.30 per cent, the Middle States, 3 per cent, and New England, .42 per cent.⁷ The illiterate minority in the South was more susceptible to panics of fear that bred mob violence, and less capable of analysis, than the more urban and sophisticated society of the North. The editor of the Virginia newspaper, the *Alexandria Gazette*, observed in 1835 that the best way to prevent mobs was to educate the people.⁸ Recent studies of the lynching of Negroes in the post-war South indicate

⁵ "Sketches of Our Volunteer Officers: Alexander Keith McClung," *Southern Literary Messenger*, XXI, 1855, p. 3; for a picture of Colonel McClung brandishing his hair-trigger pistols in a Jackson tavern and causing the patrons to flee, see Reuben Davis, *Recollections of Mississippi and Mississippians* (Boston, 1889), 216-18.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 213-20.

⁷ J. D. B. DeBow, *Compendium of the Seventh Census* (Washington, D. C., 1854), 153.

⁸ *Alexandria Gazette*, August 25, 1836. A complete file of this excellent Southern newspaper from 1820 to 1860 is preserved in the library of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

that mobs are more likely to originate in the rural districts than in cities and industrial areas.⁹ The rural population tend to generate a higher emotional voltage over issues than the dwellers in cities who are less provincial and have greater opportunities to make comparisons. At the outbreak of the Civil War the rural districts were hot for assertion of Southern rights, while the city folk in general were for compromise and conciliation, not only because of a divergence of economic interests but because of less provincialism.¹⁰ In the monotonous Southern villages, mobs afforded a thrill of excitement to the loiterers and reckless youth. The blacking of an abolitionist to resemble a Negro, shaving half of his head, decorating him with tar and feathers, forcing him to submit to the kisses and caresses of the darkeys, broke the tedium of rural life and offered an outlet for boredom. Corn whiskey and a primitive sadistic element in human nature also played a role in the formation of Southern mobs.

The chief cause for the recurrence of mobs in the ante bellum South, however, was the strong popular excitement that was engendered by the antislavery controversy. The program of the abolitionists, immediate abolition of slavery without compensation to the slaveholders, if adopted, would have meant an enormous property loss to Southerners, and would have disrupted the economic structure of Southern society. The decline of the planter class and the economic decay of the island of Jamaica after the British Emancipation Act of 1833 were a solemn warning to Southerners of the dangers of emancipation.¹¹ But deeper than the economic motive, which aroused an opposition comparable to a modern intolerance of communist proposals, the Southerner feared the social effects of abolition, especially in destroying racial control of the Negro. The desire to keep the South a white man's country, as Professor U. B. Phillips observed, was an imperative motive that affected all classes of society from the top crust to the humblest poor white.¹² After

⁹ W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York, 1941), 299-310; see also J. H. Chadbourn, *Lynching and the Law* (Chapel Hill, 1933), 4.

¹⁰ Eric F. Goldman, ed., *Historiography and Urbanization* (Baltimore, 1941), 51-54, 58-61.

¹¹ Lowell J. Ragatz, *The Fall of the Planter Class in the British Caribbean, 1763-1833* (New York, 1928), chap. xii, "The Overthrow of the Tropical Labor Regime."

¹² U. B. Phillips, "The Central Theme of Southern History," *American Historical Review* (New York), XXXIV, 1928, pp. 30-43.

1831 the South was forced to take a defensive position in regard to slavery; at the gates the abolitionists were swinging their sledge hammers; within the citadel, there was a deep feeling of insecurity. Ever latent was the fear of servile insurrection; at the same time Southerners knew that world public opinion was against their institution of slavery; there was the danger that the non-slaveholders, the majority of Southern people, might be organized against the slaveholders; and finally there was an uneasiness of conscience among many sensitive Southerners in regard to holding black men as slaves.¹³ The abolitionist attack against the civilization of the South would not have stung so painfully, unless it had coincided with a disturbing sense of insecurity and an internal doubt as to the rightness of the peculiar institution. These multiple fears of the Southern people undoubtedly constituted a major cause of the prevalence of mobs.

The first important wave of mob violence in the ante bellum South occurred in the summer of 1835. Public opinion was inflamed by the impact of antislavery literature, by the petition strategy of the abolitionists in Congress, and by the discovery of slave plots in Mississippi and Alabama. The abolitionists were very active in publishing antislavery propaganda during the critical years of 1835-36. At the annual meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society in May, 1835, a forward move was determined upon in the enlarged printing of antislavery publications.¹⁴ Lewis Tappan, president of the Society, made the following statement in regard to this campaign: "In July 1835 the American Anti-Slavery Society issued 175,000 copies of newspapers and pamphlets, of which 1000 were destroyed in Charleston. The rest are accomplishing the design intended throughout the United States."¹⁵ Such periodicals as the *Emancipator*, *Human Rights*, the *Anti-Slavery Record*, the *Slave's Friend* were issued in large editions and "scattered unsparingly through the land."¹⁶ The report of the Massachusetts

¹³ Clement Eaton, *Freedom of Thought in the Old South* (Durham, 1940), chap. x, "The Free Lances of the Upper South."

¹⁴ *Second Annual Report of the American Anti-Slavery Society* (New York), May, 1835, pp. 48-53.

¹⁵ Letter from Lewis Tappan, August 19, 1835, *Niles' Weekly Register*, XLIX, 21, September 12, 1835.

¹⁶ *Fourth Annual Report of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society* (Boston),

Anti-Slavery Society announced the policy of sending tracts and periodicals to ministers of religion, Justices of the Peace, members of Congress, and of the several state legislatures, and to other men of standing in the Southern states.¹⁷ Thus the Southern states were threatened with a deluge of fervid antislavery publications.

An analysis of this abolition literature reveals why it aroused such great resentment in the South and provoked mob violence. Many Southerners believed that if this radical literature were allowed circulation in the South it would eventually fall into the hands of slaves and incite them to an insurrection.¹⁸ In addition to this danger, Professor Avery Craven has pointed out that the abolition crusade of the North was not only an attack on the evils of Southern slavery, but it broadened into a bitter and indiscriminate condemnation of Southern society and the Southern way of life.¹⁹ The abolitionists represented the South as a land of the most unbridled lust, a modern Sodom, where the female slaves were the victims of their licentious masters. The slave codes were cited as proof of the cruelty of Southern people to Negroes. They attacked the most vulnerable features of Southern slavery, the internal slave trade with its separation of families, and the denial of educational opportunities to the slave. They maintained that on the great plantations of the South the slaves were worked to death and inadequately fed. They presented the concept of the South as a land of extremes, proud aristocrats disdainful of honest work, and ignorant, vicious, exploited poor whites.²⁰

January 20, 1836, pp. 17, 18; see also *The Quarterly Anti-Slavery Magazine* (New York), July, 1837, p. 348.

¹⁷ *Fourth Annual Report of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society*, 18; *The Liberator*, Garrison's newspaper, which contained the most extreme abuse of the South, had a small circulation, almost entirely in the North. Its chief support became the free Negroes of Philadelphia, New York, and Boston.

¹⁸ Resolutions on Incendiary Publications, *Acts of the General Assembly of the State of North Carolina, 1835-1836* (Raleigh, 1836), 121, 122. These resolutions state a conviction of Southerners that the slaves were peaceful and contented and would not think of insurrection, unless incited by incendiary publications of abolitionists.

¹⁹ Avery O. Craven, *The Repressible Conflict, 1830-1861* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1939), 61, 62, 79-86.

²⁰ Many of these errors are exposed by Henry H. Simms, "A Critical Analysis of Abolition Literature, 1830-1840," *Journal of Southern History*, VI, 1940, pp. 368-82;

But the abolitionists particularly infuriated the South by their main contention that Southerners were continually living in sin. The Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society Report of 1836 had a distinct glow of moral superiority when it declared: "But we conceive it to be our duty to distribute to all, who are guilty of slaveholding, our pamphlets and papers exhibiting our views of the enormity and danger of so doing."²¹ Theodore Weld, the great Ohio abolitionist, urged that the best technique for agitating the abolition of slavery in the South was to concentrate on portraying the moral evil of slavery.²² He collected choice items of violence that he had culled from Southern newspapers in the New York Public Library and published a terrible indictment of Southern civilization entitled *Slavery As It Is*.²³ The Massachusetts Society defended the use of pictorial representations as a legitimate means to expose national wickedness. The *Anti-Slavery Record*, May, 1835, for example, carried an incendiary picture of a coffle of slaves going South. The slave-driver was represented as dangling a little Negro baby in one hand and brandishing a whip in the other. The mother was crouching, imploring mercy. Another picture (issue of January, 1836) showed a prostrate slave begging for his life, while a planter stood over him pointing a gun.²⁴

In addition to this extreme propaganda, with which the abolitionists sought to deluge the South, they also aroused Southerners by their presentation of petitions to Congress to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia. In the session of 1835-36 antislavery petitions containing thirty-four thousand names, in which the names of women predominated, were presented to Congress.²⁵ John Quincy Adams became a leader in presenting

by F. L. and H. Owsley, "The Economic Basis of Society in the Late Ante-Bellum South," *ibid.*, VI, 24-45; and by studies of slavery by U. B. Phillips, C. S. Sydnor, and R. B. Flanders.

²¹ *Fourth Annual Report of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society*, 19.

²² Gilbert H. Barnes, *The Antislavery Impulse, 1830-1844* (New York, 1933), 79.

²³ Theodore Weld, *Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (New York, 1839); see also Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Boston, 1853).

²⁴ *Anti-Slavery Record* (New York), May, 1835, and January, 1836. Scattered issues in the Harvard University Library.

²⁵ Barnes, *The Antislavery Impulse*, 131, 140, 141. A modern parallel is the practice of pressure groups who send a flock of telegrams to Congressmen.

these petitions, and his biting sarcasm and taunts of Southern congressmen added oil to the flames of resentment.²⁶ In 1836 Congress passed the gag resolution, tabling such petitions without discussion. The bitter feeling evoked in Southern breasts by the petition strategy of the abolitionist and by the debates on the gag resolution is revealed in the passionate words of Henry A. Wise, Congressman from Virginia, when only ten Senators voted against receiving abolition petitions: "The South lies low and bleeding. Oh God! for energy for the occasion!"²⁷

In the summer of 1835 a mob headed by former governor, Robert Y. Hayne, entered the Charleston, S. C., post office and destroyed several sacks of mail containing abolition literature. A vigilance committee of twenty-one members was appointed to meet incoming ships and search them for incendiary publications.²⁸ In this same year numerous anti-abolition meetings were held throughout the South which established vigilance committees to deal with an extraordinary emergency. Some idea of the nature of these vigilance committees can be gained from a perusal of the resolutions of a meeting in Fairfax County, Virginia, adopted in August, 1835. The chairman of the assembly was ordered to appoint three men in each militia district of the county to form a local vigilance committee. Their duty was "to detect and to bring to speedy punishment all emissaries who may be found within the borders of our county, giving circulation to the papers or pamphlets put forth by the Abolitionist Associations of the North, agitating the question of slavery, and therefore endangering the peace and tranquility of our land."²⁹ A committee of correspondence composed of twenty members was also established to keep in touch with like committees throughout the South. When Southerners emigrated to the West, they carried with them a knowledge of the technique of vigilance committees.

During the year 1835 four notable cases of mob action occurred in the upper South. There was an episode that reminds one of the burning of Jewish books in modern Germany. The vigilance

²⁶ Charles F. Adams, ed., *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams* (12 vols., Philadelphia, 1874-1877), IX, 451, 454, 455; X, 64, 65, 72.

²⁷ Wise to a person in Gloucester County, Virginia (name torn from the letter), March 12, 1836, Henry A. Wise MSS., Library of Congress.

²⁸ Theodore D. Jervay, *Robert Y. Hayne and His Times* (New York, 1909), 379-81.

²⁹ *Alexandria Gazette*, August 29, 1835.

committee of Louisa County, Virginia, heard that two gentlemen in the county had some copies of Rev. John Hersey's "An Appeal to Christians on the Subject of Slavery." The committee visited these gentlemen and requested them to give up the books for inspection. The committee judged the books to be of an inflammatory nature and burned them publicly in front of the court house.³⁰ Amos Dresser, a student at Lane Seminary, was traveling through Tennessee in 1835 with some antislavery publications in his carriage. He was arrested and tried by a vigilance committee of sixty citizens of Nashville, and sentenced to twenty lashes, which were administered by a city officer.³¹ Dr. Reuben Crandall, who had been engaged to give lectures on botany at Georgetown University, brought some antislavery publications into the District of Columbia, marked "read and circulate." These publications, which were left in a store, caused a large mob to form to do violence to him, but he was saved by being arrested and taken to jail. After spending some months in jail, he was tried in Washington by a court and released.³² The pressure of the mob was exerted to prevent James G. Birney from establishing an antislavery newspaper, the *Philanthropist* at Danville, Kentucky, in the summer of 1835. An orderly public meeting was held, in which threats of violence, of destroying any press used in publishing an abolitionist newspaper, so frightened the printer that he sold his press to a pro-slavery man.³³ The following year Birney began publishing the *Philanthropist* at New Richmond, Ohio, near Cincinnati, but a mob destroyed his press.³⁴

While these mobs were forming in the upper South, the lower

³⁰ Richmond *Enquirer*, September 25, 1835.

³¹ Amos Dresser, *The Narrative of Amos Dresser, with Stone's Letters from Natchez* (New York, 1836); and *Narrative of the Arrest, Lynch Law Trial, and Scourging of Amos Dresser at Nashville, Tennessee, August 1835* (Oberlin, Ohio, 1849).

³² *Trial of Reuben Crandall, M.D., Charged with Publishing Seditious Libels by Circulating the Publications of the American Anti-Slavery Society* (New York, 1836). A pamphlet in the Library of Congress.

³³ Dwight L. Dumond, ed., *Letters of James Gillespie Birney, 1831-1857* (2 vols., New York, 1938), I, 197-200, 204-10, 232-35; William Birney, *James G. Birney and His Times* (New York, 1890), 181.

³⁴ Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight L. Dumond, eds., *Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimké Weld, and Sarah Grimké, 1822-1844* (2 vols., New York, 1934), I, 324.

South was agitated by a pathological fear of servile insurrection. The people of Mississippi were terrified by a pamphlet published in 1835 by Virgil Stewart purporting to reveal the plot of an extensive slave uprising in the South led by white desperadoes, chief of whom was John A. Murrell.³⁵ A panic of fear swept the central counties of Mississippi, patrols were organized, frantic appeals were made to the governor to call out the militia, and vigilance committees were appointed to arrest emissaries of the Murrell gang.³⁶ The vigilance committee of Clinton in Hinds County wrote to the governor that it had been organized by "the mass of the community" for a twofold purpose: (1) "for the direction of the utmost energies of the community for its self defense in the midst of actual insurrection" and (2) "for the suppression of irregular and precipitate movements resulting from extreme excitement and the protection of suspected persons until the just and sure ascertainment of their guilt."³⁷

An insight into the mob psychology of Southerners under the stress of fear is given by a letter of Henry Watson, Jr., a Northerner who had settled at Greensborough, Alabama. Writing to a friend in Connecticut, he observed:

You have read, too, of the proceedings at Clinton in Miss: & the neighboring counties — the insurrection contemplated was confined to a small neighborhood & I have no idea was dreamed of except in those few counties — But those proceedings, the Murrell pamphlet (of which you must have heard) and the presence of an occasional Abolitionist, has excited the people of the whole South. Two men were taken up here a few days since, on suspicion of having dropped some copies of the "Emancipator," and it was only upon the suggestion of one or two

³⁵ Augustus Q. Walton, Esq. (pseudonym), *A History of the Detection, Conviction, Life and Designs of John A. Murel, The Great Western Land Pirate: together with His Villany and Plan of Exciting a Negro Rebellion. Also a Catalogue of the Names of Four Hundred and Fifty-Five of His Mystic Clan Fellows and Followers* (Cincinnati, n.d.); also H. R. Howard, *The History of Virgil A. Stewart and his Adventure in Capturing and Exposing the Great Western Land Pirate and his Gang* (New York, 1839).

³⁶ Thomas Shackelford, *Proceedings of the Citizens of Madison County, Mississippi, at Livingston, in July 1835, in Relation to the Trial and Punishment of Several Individuals Implicated in a Contemplated Insurrection in this State* (Jackson, Mississippi, 1836). A pamphlet in the Rare Book Room, Library of Congress.

³⁷ A. Hutchinson and William Jones of the Committee of Safety of Clinton to Governor Hiram G. Runnels, July 11, 1835. *Executive Papers of Mississippi*, MSS. at Jackson, Mississippi.

of the more prudent, that a committee waited upon them & had an investigation. They were found innocent & discharged with a certificate to that effect — But with an excited populace a man stands a poor chance. The punishment inflicted by the Law for the circulation of such papers is *death* — but *this* is not the way to dispense it. A public meeting was held yesterday & a committee appointed to try & examine similar cases hereafter; but the more intelligent succeeded finally in getting passed a resolution that the committee should in no case adjudge death — that is one point gained — I am astonished at the blindness of the propagators of the doctrines of abolition, and however much I may abominate slavery, I do believe that the circulation in the South of such publications as the abolition newspapers is like throwing a fire brand into a magazine. Luckily few of our slaves can read and the longer they are kept in ignorance the better for us.³⁸

Before the popular frenzy had subsided, a number of white men and innocent Negroes were hanged. Henry S. Foote, later governor of Mississippi, but at this time a young lawyer in Mississippi, has vividly described the savage temper of the mob during this excitement over insurrection. Foote received an urgent appeal to come to the aid of a Kentuckian who had been imprisoned by the vigilance committee of Livingston. The suspect was a poor man who had brought a load of corn to sell in Yazoo County. There was no real evidence against him except the testimony of two or three ignorant Negroes, “from whose reluctant lips certain disclosures had been coerced under the severest infliction of the lash.” Foote tried to save him, but twenty minutes after he arrived the Kentuckian was hanged.³⁹ This excitement over slave plots produced a strong reaction in Mississippi against “the black hearted crew of abolitionists.”⁴⁰ A leading newspaper of the state, the *Jackson Mississippian*, summed up the feeling of the community: “the white men who were engaged in the matter, and who instigated the few negroes to insurrection, who have been detected, have been hung — as all such wretches should be — without judge or jury, as examples to others who are disposed to tamper with our slaves.”⁴¹

Ten years later a great mob assembled at Lexington, Ky., to

³⁸ Henry Watson, Jr., to Julius Reed, August 23, 1835. Henry Watson, Jr., MSS., Duke University Library.

³⁹ Henry S. Foote, *Casket of Reminiscences* (Washington, D. C., 1874), 253-55.

⁴⁰ *Southern Argus* (Columbus, Mississippi), July 18, 1835.

⁴¹ *The Mississippian* (Jackson), July 17, 1835.

suppress the publication of the *True American*, a newspaper devoted to gradual emancipation of the slaves.⁴² This journal was edited by Cassius Marcellus Clay, scion of an aristocratic Kentucky family who had been educated at Yale. "Cash" Clay was an indomitable man, ready to fight with pistol or bowie knife for his convictions. He realized that he might encounter mob violence if he published an antislavery paper in the South, so that he fortified his office in an ingenious manner, with small brass cannon commanding the door to his printing establishment, a trap door in the roof for escape, and a keg of gunpowder with a fuse attached to blow up any invaders.⁴³ But when the crisis that he had foreseen arose, he was sick in bed and could not defend his property.⁴⁴ A large but orderly assembly of citizens met in Lexington on August 18, 1845, and resolved that no abolition press could be permitted to pollute the soil of Kentucky. A prominent lawyer, Thomas F. Marshall, addressed the gathering, in which he gave the principal rationalization offered by Southerners to justify mob violence. It was the argument, *Salus populi suprema lex*, that the safety of the people demanded the suppression of an abolition newspaper that might incite the slaves to bloody insurrection.⁴⁵ After listening to Marshall, the assembly chose a committee of sixty to remove the invidious press of the *True American*. The mayor notified this committee that they were violating the law, but that he was powerless to prevent their action. The committee dismantled the press, boxed the parts, and sent them to Cincinnati.⁴⁶

At the same period mob violence arose in the Upper South over the division of the Methodist Church. When the Methodist Episcopal Church split (over the question of slavery) into a Northern

⁴² For a fuller account of this episode of mob violence, see Clement Eaton, "The Freedom of the Press in the Upper South," *MISSISSIPPI VALLEY HISTORICAL REVIEW*, XVIII, 1932, 491-95.

⁴³ *The Life of Cassius Marcellus Clay; Memoirs, Writings, and Speeches* (2 vols., Cincinnati, 1886), I, 107.

⁴⁴ C. M. Clay, *Appeal of Cassius Marcellus Clay to Kentucky and the World* (Boston, 1845).

⁴⁵ W. L. Barre, ed., *Speeches and Writings of T. F. Marshall* (Cincinnati, 1858), 208.

⁴⁶ *History and Record of the Proceedings of the People of Lexington and its Vicinity in the Suppression of the True American* (Lexington, August 25, 1845). Pamphlet in Library of Congress.

and a Southern branch in 1844, a Plan of Separation was drawn up, by which churches on the border should decide by a majority vote their allegiance to the antislavery Northern church or to the proslavery Southern church. The result of this arrangement was a bitter factional fight, characterized by a house to house canvass of members, barricaded churches, lawsuits over church property, and the mobbing of rival preachers.⁴⁷ Reverend Valentine Gray of the Northern Methodist Church, for example, tried to preach in July, 1846, in the Methodist Church at Salem on the Eastern Shore of Virginia, despite the warning of pro-Southern members. When he refused to leave, he was dragged by a faction from the pulpit by his hair and clothes, and he was unable to obtain any redress from the county court. In this same year Reverend James Hargis attempted to preach at Guilford in Accomac County, but he was forced to desist by a mob, "shooting, throwing stones at the building and shouting."⁴⁸ At Parkersburg in the western part of Virginia, a house to house canvass showed that one hundred and two members of the Methodist Church desired to join the Northern conference while eighty-two favored the Southern conference. A preacher from the Ohio conference, Rev. John Dillon, was sent to Parkersburg, but he was ordered out of town by a vigilance committee of sixty members appointed by a mass meeting of the citizens.⁴⁹ At the close of the ante bellum period the struggle between the Methodist Episcopal Church, and the Methodist Church, South, still continued, and Northern Methodist ministers, such as Rev. Wesley Smith, were mobbed by pro-slavery adherents.⁵⁰

With the advent of the decade 1850-60, mobs and vigilance committees became more dangerous as a method of crushing the radical. The violent controversy over the Wilmot Proviso and the Compromise of 1850 led to acts of intolerance against anti-slavery men in the South. In September, 1851, a spectacular example of the swift action of a vigilance committee occurred in

⁴⁷ Charles H. Ambler, *Sectionalism in Virginia from 1776 to 1861* (Chicago, 1910), 282-99.

⁴⁸ John N. Norwood, *The Schism in the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1844* (New York, 1923), 132-34.

⁴⁹ *Niles' Weekly Register*, LIX, 90.

⁵⁰ Reverend Wesley Smith, *A Defense of the Methodist Episcopal Church Against the Charges of Rev. S. Kelley and Others* (Fairmont, Virginia, 1855). Pamphlet in the State Library at Charleston, West Virginia.

Grayson County in western Virginia. John Cornutt was believed to be "a backer" of a Northern antislavery preacher who had been preaching in the neighborhood. A mob of two hundred citizens of the county visited him on his farm and ordered him "to renounce his abolition sentiments." When he refused to conform, he was stripped of clothing, tied to a tree and severely whipped until he promised to sell his property and leave the state. *The People's Press*, printed in the quiet little Moravian town of Salem, N. C., justified this use of mob law. Referring to the Grayson County episode, the editor wrote: "We warn the citizens of this and other counties to be vigilant lest others, equally obnoxious as the Ohio incendiaries, whom we have frequently felt bound to notice, may intrude themselves amongst us, and spread desolation and death in our midst. We hope that experience has taught us that a *summary process* is the only effective remedy to be resorted to in such cases."⁵¹ Cornutt attempted to secure redress from the courts, but was unsuccessful.⁵²

Several Wesleyan ministers from Ohio were engaged in preaching antislavery doctrines in some of the Piedmont counties of North Carolina during the bitter slavery controversy in Congress in 1850. Reverend Jesse McBride and Reverend Adam Crooks were arrested for circulating incendiary publications, after newspaper clamor had aroused the people against them. Crooks was acquitted but McBride was sentenced to a year in prison and a whipping of twenty lashes.⁵³ He appealed his case to the Supreme Court and continued to preach until in the spring of 1851 he was intercepted on his way to a religious service by a vigilance committee who forced him to promise to leave the state and never to return. He was saved from personal violence by the efforts of some of the first citizens of the county.⁵⁴ Several months later an assembly of citizens of Guilford and surround-

⁵¹ *The People's Press* (Salem, North Carolina), October 4, 1851. Files of this paper are preserved in the Moravian Museum, Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

⁵² *Raleigh Daily Register*, October 1, 1851; *The People's Press*, September 27, 1851; *New York Tribune*, September 29, 1851.

⁵³ *Salem Diary*, October 11, 1850, MS., Archives of the Moravian Church in America, Southern Province, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, translated from German for the writer by Miss Adelaide Fries; *Raleigh Daily Register*, October 23, 1850; *Raleigh North Carolina Standard*, October 23, 1850.

⁵⁴ *Greensboro Patriot*, May 31, 1851.

ing counties met and appointed a vigilance committee to drive out "foreign" abolition emissaries. John H. Gilmer, Whig Congressman, was one of the committee appointed to draw up resolutions. The meeting resolved that Adam Crooks and J. C. Bacon, two of the Wesleyan preachers, were agents of the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, that they had been instrumental in "running off" a number of slaves, and that these dangerous characters should be expelled from the state.⁵⁵ The leading newspapers of the state, the *Raleigh Standard*, the *Greensboro Patriot*, *The People's Press*, the *Ashboro Herald*, the *North State Whig* of Washington, N. C., upheld lynch law directed against abolitionists and were frequently direct inciters and initiators of mob violence.⁵⁶

The presidential campaign of 1856 was provocative of mob violence in the South, because it marked the appearance of the Republican party with its freesoil platform as a serious contender for the control of the national government. The most notable case of mob violence in connection with this political campaign was the driving of Professor Benjamin Sherwood Hedrick from his professorship at the University of North Carolina because he announced his sympathy for John C. Frémont, the Republican candidate.⁵⁷ Again it was the clamor of newspapers, especially the *Raleigh Standard*, that was largely responsible for this act of intolerance. In those parts of Virginia, where Northern settlers had taken up abandoned tobacco lands and restored them, occurred the most numerous cases of conflict. Also the Panhandle section of Virginia, sandwiched between Pennsylvania and Ohio, was the scene of pro-slavery mobs attacking Frémont men.⁵⁸ In Clarke County, in western Virginia, John C. Under-

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, August 2, 1851; *The People's Press*, August 2, 1851.

⁵⁶ *Raleigh Daily Register*, June 28, 1851. *The People's Press*, August 2, 1851; *North State Whig* (Washington, North Carolina), October 9, 1850; *Carolina Watchman* (Salisbury, North Carolina), June 6, 1850; on the other hand, some editors of Southern newspapers condemned the resort to lynch law, for example, the *Flag of the Union* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama), August 22, 1835; *Raleigh Star*, September 19, 1838; *Louisville Weekly Journal*, June 15, September 3, 1845; *Louisville Daily Journal*, October 4, 1849; *Ceredo Crescent* (Ceredo, Virginia), July 3, 1858.

⁵⁷ J. G. deR. Hamilton, "Benjamin Sherwood Hedrick," *James Sprunt Historical Publications*, X; and J. S. Bassett *Anti-Slavery Leaders of North Carolina* (Baltimore, 1898).

⁵⁸ *Wheeling Intelligencer*, August 18, 1856. For example, a Dr. G. P. Smith,

wood, a native of New York, was forced to abandon his farm, because he had the hardihood to attend the Republican National Convention, styling himself as delegate from Virginia. The fact that he was a cultured man, a graduate of Hamilton College, and that he had married a Southern woman, a cousin of the later famous "Stonewall" Jackson, had no weight with a large mass meeting of the citizens of Clarke County who threatened him with violence if he returned to the state.⁵⁹

Mob violence in the South reached a climax in 1859-1860 after the John Brown raid. So many acts of violence against anti-slavery men and Northerners in the South took place that Garrison could fill a large pamphlet with Southern atrocities in these two years, entitled *The New Reign of Terror in the Slaveholding States*.⁶⁰ Mobs and vigilance committees in the South arrested Northern travelers below the Mason and Dixon line, fruit tree peddlers, book agents, traveling salesmen, and Northern school teachers. The Council of State of North Carolina passed a resolution requesting the governor to require justices of the peace to examine strangers from the North, and if any persons appeared suspicious to require them to give bond.⁶¹

Two storm centers of mob violence in 1859 and 1860 were Kentucky and Texas. The tension of feeling against antislavery men had been growing in Kentucky during this last decade of the ante bellum period, because of the great loss of slave property through the operation of the Underground Railway.⁶² The excitement aroused by the John Brown raid led a mob to destroy the press of an antislavery newspaper, *The Free South*, published at Newport, Kentucky, by a machinist named William S. Bailey. Also a mob, composed of the "wealthiest and most respeaker at a Republican meeting, was roughly handled by a mob and had to be taken to jail for safety.

⁵⁹ *New York Tribune*, September 12, 1856; *Kanawha Valley Star* (Charleston, Virginia), February 3, 1857; *The Liberator*, August 16, 1856; *Dictionary of American Biography*, XIX, 113-14.

⁶⁰ William Lloyd Garrison, *The New Reign of Terror in the Slaveholding States for the Year 1859-60* (New York, 1860).

⁶¹ *Tarboro Southerner* (Tarboro, North Carolina), December 17, 1859. *Executive Papers of Virginia for 1859-1860*, box entitled, "In Re John Brown," (MSS. in Virginia State Library); these papers show an almost fantastic excitement and fear of abolitionists on the part of many Virginians.

⁶² J. Winston Coleman, Jr., *Slavery Times in Kentucky* (Chapel Hill, 1940), chapter viii, "Nigger Stealers."

spectable citizens," rode to the little antislavery colony of Berea, where the school was attended without discrimination by black and white children, and ordered the Bereans to leave for the North. They appealed to Governor Magoffin to protect them, but he refused the aid of the law and advised them to heed the mob.⁶³ Before this last expulsion, the leader of the Berea colony, John G. Fee, had been mobbed twenty-one times, but always he would pray for the mobs or start preaching to them as they persecuted him.⁶⁴ In Texas during 1860 mobs were directed primarily against suspected followers of John Brown and antislavery preachers of the Northern Methodist Church, who were accused of engineering slave plots of insurrection.⁶⁵

In addition to the mobs that lynched white men in the Old South because of their antislavery views, there were Southern mobs that lynched Negroes. Few Negroes were lynched on account of the crime of rape before the Reconstruction period. Black slaves were valuable property, which their masters tried to protect. Furthermore, the slave-owning class in the South did not share the poor whites' hatred of the Negro. Almost invariably the chief reason for lynching Negroes was the fear of servile insurrection or the brutal murder of a master or overseer by a slave. In 1856 and 1860, both presidential election years, numerous plots of slave insurrection were reported all over the South, and many slaves were killed by mobs in a horrible fashion.⁶⁶ During the insurrectionary scare of 1856 the *Memphis Eagle and Enquirer* estimated that not less than forty Negroes were executed.⁶⁷ Charges were freely made both in Northern newspapers, such as Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune*, and in some Southern newspapers that these insurrectionary panics were manufactured for political effect.⁶⁸ Never-

⁶³ *Autobiography of John G. Fee, Berea, Kentucky* (Chicago, 1891); and John A. R. Rogers, *Birth of Berea College* (Philadelphia, 1903).

⁶⁴ Edwin Rogers Embree, "A Kentucky Crusader," *American Mercury*, XXIV, 1931, p. 102.

⁶⁵ *Austin State Gazette*, July 28, 1860; *Natchez Daily Free Trader*, August 5, 1860; *New Orleans Daily Picayune*, August 19, 1860.

⁶⁶ Harvey Wish, "The Slave Insurrection Panic of 1856," *Journal of Southern History*, V, 1939, p. 222; Ollinger Crenshaw, "The Psychological Background of the Election of 1860 in the South," *The North Carolina Historical Review*, XIX, 1942, pp. 260-79.

⁶⁷ *Memphis Eagle and Enquirer*, December 30, 1856.

⁶⁸ *Austin State Gazette*, August 25, September 5, 1860; *Brownlow's Knoxville*

theless, the fact that the fear of servile insurrection reached its greatest height in December after the elections were over tends to disprove this sinister suspicion.

No study of mob violence in the Old South would be complete without a recognition of the fact that many moderate Southerners strongly condemned mobs. A good example of the attitude of high-minded Southerners to this abuse of the law is found in a letter by A. P. Hill, later to become one of Lee's great generals. He had just heard of a shocking case of lynching a poor Negro in his home town of Culpeper, Virginia, in 1850. A Negro named William Grayson was accused of murdering a white man in a horrible manner. He was brought to trial and convicted by a local jury, but his case was appealed to the Appellate Court of Virginia, which ordered a new trial on the grounds of insufficient evidence. Nevertheless the mob seized him and promptly hanged him. When Hill heard of this outrage he wrote a passionate letter saying that all the lynchers should be hanged.⁶⁹ A melancholy aftermath of this outburst of violence was the discovery that the crime had been committed by a white man. Some independent Southern editors, like George D. Prentice of the *Louisville Journal*, wrote vigorous editorials against the resort to lynching. Nevertheless, the Southern press as a whole, as an examination of many newspapers reveals, condoned, and in some cases actively encouraged, the mobbing of abolitionists who were suspected of "tampering with" the slaves.⁷⁰

No safe generalization can be made concerning the personnel of Southern mobs in the ante bellum period. Some mobs were dominated by the lower orders of Southern society. The mob that beat Amos Dresser was started by mechanics and workmen in Nashville; in the case of the lynching of Lunsford Lane, the colored abolitionist of Raleigh, N. C., in 1842, the man who applied the first coat of tar was a journeyman printer, but another leader of the mob was the profligate son of a good family of *Whig*, November 17, 1860; *Hinds County Gazette* (Raymond, Mississippi), November 7, 1868.

⁶⁹ This letter is quoted in a manuscript life of Hill by William J. Robertson, editor of the *Easton Express* (Easton, Pennsylvania), entitled "A. P. Hill Comes Up," 80, 81.

⁷⁰ *The Mississippian*, August 14, 1835, for example, said, "No law is so well adapted to such villains as *Lynch's*."

Raleigh;⁷¹ the irate group that lynched John Cornutt in the back-country of Virginia was composed primarily of yeoman farmers. On the other hand, the mob that destroyed the abolition mail in Charleston, the assembly that suppressed the *True American* in Lexington, and the mob that drove out the inhabitants of Berea included the wealthy and well-educated planters. A North Carolina blacksmith, John Stafford, wrote to Judge Thomas Ruffin, that mobs and illegal tribunals were encouraged by members of the governor's council and by influential editors in the state.⁷²

Mob violence in the South was not confined to any region, but it was more extensive in the border states. Here ran the routes of the Underground Railway that cost Southerners huge sums of money in the loss of slaves. The upper South, moreover, was the buffer region against the inroads of the abolitionists and the impact of abolition literature. Also in these states were colonies of Northerners, such as Ceredo in western Virginia, and Northern farmers who acquired cheap exhausted tobacco lands. Although it is impossible to arrive at accurate statistics, the evidence indicates that before the Civil War mobs were directed more frequently against white persons than Negroes, a phenomenon that was reversed as a result of Reconstruction policy which made the Negro a pawn in radical Republican politics. In an attempt to justify these violent lynch courts, Southerners arrived at several rationalizations, each of which contained a small measure of truth. They asserted that it was often impossible to convict abolitionists in the legal courts, because Southern laws prohibited the use of Negro testimony. They declared that the safety of the community was the supreme law, and that the slowness of the courts and the weak police system justified, in an emergency, the development of vigilance committees to supplement the regular system of justice. The large amount of illiteracy, the bad traditions of the frontier and the code duello, the practice of the planters in ignoring the law in administering an informal justice on their plantations, and the rancor of party politics contributed to the disregard of law, which was the basic pattern of mob violence.

⁷¹ Lunsford Lane, *Narrative of Lunsford Lane, Formerly of Raleigh, N. C.* (Boston, 1845).

⁷² J. G. deR. Hamilton, ed., *The Papers of Thomas Ruffin* (4 vols., Raleigh, 1918-1920), III, 66, 67.

The prevalence of mob violence in the Old South left deep scars on Southern society. The growth of liberalism was rendered difficult in an atmosphere, surcharged with emotion, which produced mobs and vigilance committees that enforced a uniformity of thought in the Old South on the most important question of the period. The prevalence of mobs below the Potomac was used as effective propaganda by editors and politicians in the North to produce a distorted picture of the South.⁷³ Having conveniently forgotten that the Northern states had earlier gone through a phase of intolerant mob violence, these agitators and politicians portrayed the South as a land where life and civil liberties were constantly imperiled by the reign of lynch law. Another pernicious result of mob violence in the Southern states was the impairment of respect for the orderly processes of the law. Relatively few cases involving the circulation of antislavery literature or the arrest of abolitionists came before the legal courts; the Southern people supplanted the courts with mobs and vigilance committees.⁷⁴ Indeed, one of the outstanding paradoxes of Southern life was the reverence for the Federal Constitution and the law of the Bible which Southerners displayed, while they frequently ignored the legal courts in dealing with abolitionists and Negro insurrectionists.⁷⁵ In the light of this background of violence, it is easy to see why Southerners turned so readily to the Ku Klux Klan and similar organizations during the Reconstruction period. Lynch law in the settled communities of the South has developed by waves, primarily the reactions of an emotional people to the dangers to white supremacy. From a high point in 1892, during the Populist movement, the tide of lynching has receded, as the South has become more urban and industrialized, until it has become practically extinct in states like North Carolina and Virginia.⁷⁶

⁷³ H. C. Perkins, Jr., *Northern Editorials on Secession* (2 vols., New York, 1942), I, Section XII.

⁷⁴ When cases were brought before Southern courts, the judges interpreted the laws in a moderate spirit; see Eaton, *Freedom of Thought in the Old South*, chap. v, "The Law and the Courts."

⁷⁵ Charles S. Sydnor, "The Southerner and the Laws," *Journal of Southern History*, VI, 1940, pp. 3-24.

⁷⁶ On the other hand, Mississippi and Georgia, predominantly rural states with a high proportion of Negroes, led the nation in the number of lynchings between the years 1882 and 1927. Walter White, *Rope and Faggot, A Biography of Judge Lynch* (New York, 1929), 234-35.